

TRANSFORMATION OF INDIAN NATIONALISM AND 'OTHERIZATION' OF MUSLIMS IN INDIA

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Abstract

India has altered its military stratagem under the Modi government from nuclear deterrence to offensive defence. The constant use of offensive defence in the milieu of deliberate political aggression against Pakistan and victimization of the Muslim community in India is making Indian military doctrine a hostage of hyper-nationalistic politics of Hindutva. Since its rise to power, the BJP government has conflated anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan approaches. Pakistan remains a crucial factor in its domestic, diplomatic, and foreign policy rhetoric. The internal discord and surge of violence against the Muslim population, as evident by 2020-riots in north-eastern New Delhi, are indicative of vigorous reforming of the national identity of India dominated by Hindutva ideology. Therefore, this paper addresses Hindu nationalism, which arose as a political ideology and caused an insecure environment for Indian Muslims while becoming precarious for Pakistan. It infers that Hindu nationalism, along with its assimilation approach towards minorities, is gradually asserting exclusionary conception of a state where cultural and political centrality of Hindutva has become a core theme.

Keywords: Islam, Hindutva, Nationalism, Identity, Otherization.

Introduction

The evolving majoritarian Indian national identity and rule of Hindu right-wing in Indian mainstream politics is affecting its relationship in the South Asian region. The neighbouring states are apprehensive of increasingly expansionist designs of India beyond its borders based on Hindutva enthused ideology. Indian leadership intends to recapture Indian cultural greatness and asserting the ascendancy of a monolithic Hindu state in the region. The policies of the BJP government to condition its citizens with religious identity have proved to be anti-Muslim, anti-Christian, even anti-Dalit. They have also provoked an extremely anti-Pakistan oratory in the Indian diplomatic and public spheres. The intense polarization in domestic politics and radicalization of society have far-reaching consequences for Indian society.

The emergence of the nation-state system under the European Westphalian model of 1648 reflected 'nationalism' as a substantial development. It is perceived as a homogenizing force based on common culture, blood ties, language, religion, clan, or

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region. Nationalistic sentiments of people are closely related to cultural values and religious sentiments. They strengthen their bonding to prop up religious and cultural identities. In this connection, a democratic state accommodates all diversities. Pluralism and consociationalism are opted to celebrate distinct ethnicities, i.e., Indian nationalism is a combination of diverse religions; however, it is misunderstood with Hinduism.

During British rule, Indians stood against the exploitative colonial order. Arguably, Indian nationalism is the by-product of colonialism.¹ Augustine (2009) analysed Indian nationalism in the context of South Asian politics. Since the primitive ages, this region remained under dynastic rule. People had loyalties to a single power centre. However, with the British invasion of India during the mid-19th century, religious and linguistic cleavages became more pronounced. The political elite among Muslims and Hindus got an opportunity to assert their share in politics. An important development in 1925 was the emergence of the Hindutva movement led by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, based on Hindu nationalism to create a collective Hindu identity as an essence of Bharat (India). Later it was mingled with Hinduism by Hindu nationalists.² Simultaneously, the capitalist economic system introduced by Britishers aggravated conflicts among different classes. However, during recent decades, the extremist policies of BJP, a political wing of Hindu nationalist organization *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), led to inter-faith disharmony and induced ethnic crisis.³

Against this backdrop, this paper analyses the militant outlook of Hindu Nationalism and the idea of Hindu *Rashtra* constraining secularism in India. Following qualitative and analytical research parameters, it also digs out religious contentions in Indian society and investigates the outrages against the religious identity of the Muslim community in a heterogeneous Indian state.

Manifestation of Religious Contentions in Indian Society

Religious contentions entrenched in Indian society need holistic exploration of the Indian Constitution and societal structure. While carrying out contextual analysis of the Indian 1950-Constitution, Article 1 delineates the discriminations against minority rights in terms of political representation. Although it has provided educational opportunities to all as fundamental human rights and promoted ethnic accommodation through linguistic provisions, the demand for separate electorates is not acknowledged. In this connection, the interpretation of Indian national identity is considered significant. The proponents of secularism emphasize secular values, while others stress Hindu nationalism. The contrast between these two ideologies is engrained in the societal structure of India. It has created a polarization between seculars and Hindu nationalists, and the gulf has widened.

The debate is notably critical regarding group rights. The integrationists perceived that maximum group rights were necessary for inter-ethnic harmony. Initially, there was a provision for reserved seats to secure religious minorities in the

constitutional draft of 1948 but was opposed as diverting from secularism. The separate quota for minorities required the recognition of their religious identity, which was considered against the spirit of secularism. Moreover, the political history of India manifested the 1947-partition because of a separate electorate.⁴ Therefore, in 1949, Nehru eventually withdrew the quota for religious groups.

Another approach to accommodate diverse identities in Indian Federation was restricted multiculturalism. The proponents believed in limited rights for minorities under Articles 25 and 26 of the Indian Constitution and emphasized state intervention as mandatory for the public good. Apart from the religious rights, the experience of self-rule in respective territories had been quite complex for minorities in Indian Federation. During the evolutionary phase of the Indian Constitution, all provincial units were given similar rights even Article 370 did not provide special status to Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) based on religious or ethnic identity. It was granted because of the territorial dispute between Pakistan and India.⁵ Likewise, the proposal of a separate constitution for princely states was also rejected.

The recognition of religious identity remained controversial under the Indian federal setting. In the course, cultural indicators, like language, were acknowledged to maintain identities. The Indian Congress Party always supported linguistic identification to foster national integration. Therefore, Indian nationalism, which emerged during the 19th century, was based on the multiplicity of language. However, it was propagated that all nationalities living in British India were supposed to be Indians without discrimination regarding language or religion. On the other hand, the All India National Congress proposed Hindi as the national language of India. It reflected the parochial approach of Hindu nationalists towards multiculturalism.

Similarly, after the 1947-partition of British India, when the framers of the Indian Constitution generated a discourse regarding group rights, Hindu nationalists predominantly avoided those suggestions related to differential treatment with minorities. Only theoretical provision was given to maintain equality among all cultural or religious groups under Articles 29 and 30 of the Indian Constitution. It was considered as a concession for minority groups conferred by the state than its obligation. There was a normative deficit in the Indian Constitution about religious minorities. Hindu majoritarianism remained the dominant phenomenon in Indian society. It reflected contrast in the ideology of Indian nationalists who did not believe in religious identities as the basis of multiculturalism.

‘Otherization’ of Muslim Community

The distinct religious identity of Muslims was visibly emphasized under the ‘Two Nation Theory’ by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (the founder of the Aligarh Movement) during the second half of the 19th century in United India. This theory explained the religious grounds of the Muslim population as a separate nation. It was opposed by

Hindu nationalists like Aurobindo Ghose, Bankim Chatterjee, V.D. Savarkar and Lajpat Rai. They did not believe in religious parameters to distinguish different nationalities.

In this connection, some proponents envisaged the syncretic nature of the Hindu religion. It determines the fusion of multiple religious values and cultures in India. On one hand, 'Varna Dharma' emphatically stressed a caste system, while on the other hand, 'Manava Dharma' vehemently promoted the principles of secularism. Varna Dharma originated from Aryan culture when they migrated to India. Although several other settlers lived there, i.e., Huns, Arabs, Afghans, Mongols, Europeans, etc., Aryan culture, their caste system, and political influence remained dominant.⁶ Aryan established a misogynist societal structure, where there was a distinction based on colour, creed, and caste. They flourished Brahminic religion. Despite the rigidity of Brahminic followers, some other religions like Buddhism and Jainism emerged for the lower classes.⁷ However, Islam and Christianity were brought by outsiders.

Muslims and Christians were concentrated in different regions with specific demographic, cultural, economic, and political outcomes. Gradually, the group closure developed, creating various pockets of religious minorities. State machinery did not make conscious efforts to foster common grounds among minority groups. However, these minorities did not give rise to challenges or political threats for the Hindu majority during the early decades of the Indian Federation. Since the beginning, Indian nationalism was perceived as a positive force to shelter all diversities in Indian society. On the other hand, the promotion of Indian nationalism generated the phenomenon of majoritarian dominance. In this backdrop, Hindu nationalism became more chauvinistic and reflected even stratagem for its survival or projection.

The most critical contention occurred between Muslims and Hindus concerning the Uniform Civil Code in United India. Under these laws, all religious identities had the freedom to practice their religion. Soon after the 1947-partition, Prime Minister Nehru initiated the Civil Code for Hindus. Although Muslims, Christians, and fire-worshippers could continue with their laws, Hindus perceived that other minorities, especially Muslims, took undue advantage of these laws and violated the spirit of secularism. In this connection, the 1975-Shah Bano case⁸ aggravated the situation. The outcomes of this case, including the bill for Muslim Women's protection on divorce and the establishment of a Board for Muslim Minority to facilitate them, were opposed by Hindus. It was considered as an assault on Supreme Court's verdicts. Simultaneously, the Congress Party was also criticized for giving privileges to the Muslim community.

In addition, the 1985-Ahmedabad riots (continued for seven months) ignited Hindu-Muslim controversies when Gujrat State decided to enhance the quota for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC). Leader of Congress Party and the Chief Minister of Gujrat Madhav Singh increased the quota from 10 percent to 28 percent in governmental and educational institutions. Although these reforms were advantageous for low caste Hindus and other downtrodden populations, Muslim beneficiaries were unbearable for Hindu nationalists. According to the Dave

Commission of Inquiry (1985), these policy measures were misinterpreted and transformed into communal antagonism to target the state. Indian media and civil society viewed that these riots would provoke a culture of intolerance. During these clashes, stabbing, killing, and burning of shops and houses of the Muslim community aggravated the situation. Student wings of BJP were held responsible by the police force for agitation in educational institutions. On the other side, BJP propagated that the Congress Party extended alliances with lower classes and minority groups to enlarge their vote bank. Official reports condemned this propaganda to maintain law and order in Ahmedabad. Regrettably, the reform program for SEBC could not be materialized.

Furthermore, Hindu extremist organizations, such as Shev Sina and its tactics to promote Hinduism, while negating the rights of other minorities, accentuated religious conflicts. Shev Sina denounced preferential rights for minorities. During the 1990s, when BJP came into power, the Muslim population remained insecure. The issue of Babri Mosque and the biased attitude by right-wing party Shev Sina against religious minorities created unrest in Indian society. It had witnessed on several occasions in terms of Muslim genocide. The destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992 manifested xenophobia against Muslims. They claimed to reconstruct Ram Mandar (temple) over there to revive the spirit of Hinduism. As Hindu –Muslim dichotomy had roots in the past, there was a perception that the Muslim invaders from Central Asia occupied Indian Territory and subverted local religions, cultural values, and traditions.

Side by side, Hindu nationalists were apprehensive regarding Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, giving special status to the State of Jammu and Kashmir (Muslim majority area). The constitutional guarantees and Nehru's policy of ethnic accommodation could not ensure integration among Muslims and Hindus in India. Subsequently, the Muslim majority in IIOJK did not recognize Indian de facto rule and continued their liberation struggle against the heavy deployment of the Indian armed forces. They always raised voices for holding a plebiscite under the UNSC resolutions.⁹

Perhaps, the political dynamics of communalism in India have been more related to the quest for power. Some extremists among Hindus expounded that Muslim rule in Indian history instigated communal riots during the past centuries. Hindu nationalists also blamed Muslim writers for ethnic conflicts in India. Contrarily, ethnic and communal clashes emerged with the rise of Hindu fundamentalists in Indian politics. The increasing mandate for BJP manifests that the Hindu majority wants to hegemonies all minority groups to keep them marginalized in the state structure. BJP opts for coercive policies towards Kashmiri Muslims and targeting Pakistan for supporting the Kashmir cause.

Militant Identity of Hindu Nationalism and Hindu Rashtra

Secularism as a wide-ranging idea directs towards an acknowledgment of heterogeneity of identity. Under Indian secularism, the western notion of strict Church-State separation was not incorporated in its true sense, whereas India kept an invisible distance from religion.¹⁰ Polarization was evident by a contending view of Indian identity defined by Hindu culture and subordination of all minorities to majority culture through their assimilation into a Hindu nation. The Indian National Congress advocated secular nationalism utilizing religious sentiments whenever suited to its political ambitions. The tendency of referring to religion served political interests and intensified under the premiership of Indira Gandhi. However, despite communal violence against Muslims and providing them fewer job opportunities, the Indian state metaphorically remained secular.

Many of the cultural, social, and political conflicts in India stemmed from its contending versions of Nationalism.¹¹ It has been provided that viewing Hinduism as a religion is a recent development. Previously, Hinduism was denoted to a country or location rather than symbolizing the homogeneity of a religious belief.¹² The polarization of Indian identity largely stemmed from communalism based on power relations and competitive determinations of being dominant and counter-dominant during the colonial period. Hindu nationalism in India existed for decades, however, it remained comparatively a weak political force before the 1980s. Against the backdrop of the organizational decay of the Indian National Congress and the lack of other centrist parties in India, Hindu nationalists tried to present themselves as an ideological and institutional alternative. Hindu nationalist assertions became more visible in response to the perceptible separatist tendencies in India while demonstrating two coinciding impulses of territorial integrity for building 'Akhund Bharat' and political devotion to Hinduism for the sake of Hinduization of nation and state. Moreover, Hindu nationalism along with its assimilation approach towards minorities gradually asserted an exclusionary conception of the Indian state where cultural and political centrality of Hinduism became a core theme.

The conceptualization of a Hindu Rashtra and its projection as a decisive path to Indian development visualized by fanatic Hindus like Savarkar and Golwalker led to contesting nationhood with geopolitical and religious imagined boundaries of the Indian state. Hindutva does not believe in equality of citizenship. The idea of a Hindu state directed against Muslims by viewing them as 'OTHERS' and assert anti-Muslim rhetoric while challenging the status of citizenship of Muslims.¹³ Since the 1980s, cultural assertions and the Hindutva ideology of *Sangh Parivar* in politics transformed Hindu communalism into fundamentalism. The technological advancement and increase in the mode of communications pushed conservative Hindus to militarized Hindu nationalist sentiments.¹⁴ Later in 1989 and 1991, the changes into Indian electoral dynamics with the emergence of BJP expanded the political geography of the Hindu nationalist movement. The Hindu nationalist mobilization reached its peak along with BJP endorsement of the construction of a Hindu temple on the site of Babri

mosque. The demolition of the mosque in 1992, while causing extreme communal violence and taking the lives of almost 2000 people, ascertained the fact that Indian secular claims were overshadowed by acute polarization. BJP's political compulsions due to its coalitions with other political parties to complete its first tenure in power from 1999-2004 and later its electoral loss in 2004 and 2009 elections toned down the party's provocative oratory.¹⁵ It further led BJP to combine its Hindu nationalist strategy with the promise of economic development and be empowered to secure political support.

Since its electoral triumph in 2014 and re-election in 2019 with a landslide victory,¹⁶ BJP emerged as a hegemonic political power in domestic politics and exerted its ideological dominance by unfolding the blatant majoritarian agenda. The revocation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution on August 5, 2019, and the division of the Muslim majority region into two federal administrated entities is a fulfilment of the ideological thirst of Hindutva for making all minorities subordinate to its vision of homogenous Hindu India. The passage of the Citizen Amendment Act by the Indian Parliament on December 11, 2020, exposed the exclusivity nature of Indian nationalism as religion, has been used as a differentiator which refuted the secular claims of the Indian state. These policies of BJP significantly eroded the secular nature of Indian polity while fading the constitutional principles of secularism and equality.

Hindu nationalism primarily calls for eliminating or assimilating non-Hindu, specifically Muslims. Hindutva nationalism builds upon preconceived threats of Islamophobia and 'Otherization' of Muslims, portrayed as antagonists to the so-called vision of Hindu India.¹⁷ The idea of Modi for developed India reflects this approach. While referring to envisage the glorious past of India, only Hindu contributions are central to this development discourse, whereas non-Hindus are considered insignificant. Taking inspiration from the past when Muslims were non-existent in India, Hindutva is leading to declare Hindu as perpetually dominant in terms of material control and principal identity of the Indian state.¹⁸

The increasing popularity of BJP is not inadvertent as it expanded along with the increase of tensions between the Hindu and Muslim populations. The BJP government and its nationalist policies have aggravated 'Zero-Sum Nationalism' while implicitly supporting communal violence. Critics of the BJP government and those who do not stand with the government are called anti-nationalists, dissenters, and pro-Pakistani.¹⁹ The Muslim population of India is often called traitors and advised by BJP and its associate leadership to 'go to Pakistan' if they insist claim their fundamental and group rights. The decisive electoral success of BJP politically pressurized the Indian National Congress and other political parties to embrace the soft version of Hindu nationalism, which was discouraged by Congress leadership like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in the early decades of the Indian state.

The BJP's triumph to power is an upshot of generating a popular discourse that the Hindu majority is at risk of being taken over and dominated by minorities.²⁰ Indian society seems more receptive to Hindu nationalism²¹ in the wake of globally

emergent Islamophobia as many of the Hindus in India view themselves culturally vulnerable due to their existing divisions of the caste system. Furthermore, in the wake of the pandemic (Covid-19), sporadic incidents of violence against Muslims were inflicted as they were blamed for deliberately spreading the infection.²² On the other hand, Hindu nationalist also altered their propaganda techniques by incorporating strands of populism into their political appeal. Sanatan Sanstha, a Hindutva organization and an advocate of Hindu Rashtra, questioned Indian secularism by pronouncing that the Indian Constitution does not protect the majority Hindu community. They demanded to remove the word 'secular' from the preamble of the Indian constitution.²³ They argue that most Hindus are in a disadvantageous position due to the secular constitution. BJP's hostility towards the Muslim population leading to a homegrown problem of violent 'Othering' of Muslims. Modi government also alleges Pakistan for supporting militancy for nothing. It often escalates tensions at the Pakistan border (LoC) to divert international attention from its domestic human rights violations and atrocities in IIOJK.

In the 2019-general elections, the BJP campaign was built on the so-called surgical strikes of September 2016 and alleged Balakot airstrikes of February 2019, which tried to develop the domestic chronicle that Indian borders are safe under BJP belligerent defence policy. Pakistan and India prevented a direct conflict in post-1999 and maintained a ceasefire since 2003 on LoC; however, due to the offensive-defence strategy²⁴ of India, border skirmishes between the two states intensified. BJP government deployed additional thousands of troops in IIOJK in August 2019 and detained thousands of Kashmiris under security lockdown while depriving them of their fundamental rights.²⁵ This changed strategy of India indicated that the Indian national leadership wants to shift its focus from the status quo between the two states. The Indian hybrid war against Pakistan is empirically evident. A Brussel-based NGO, EU DisinfoLab, lately reported a global network across 65 states and almost consisted of 265 websites significantly linked to an Indian company Srivastava group, which is primarily responsible for anti-Pakistan lobbying and propaganda in Europe.²⁶ It is inevitably fermenting conflict between India and Pakistan as their bilateral relations are characterized by an Indian hard-line approach towards nuclear-armed Pakistan.

The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, while mentioning Pakistan's ability for a befitting response, warned that domestic insecurities of the Modi government and hysteria of mustering Hindu nationalism are underlying reasons for heightening tensions between the two states. He further added that Indian False Flag operations are to embarrass and isolate Pakistan internationally.²⁷ *Washington Post* revealed that on the Pulwama incident, many reports by key Indian organizations like NDTV, Indian Today, Indian Express, Mumbai Mirror, News 18, ANI, and many others referred to anonymous government sources rather than quoting independent investigations. Similarly, Indian media provided misleading facts on the Balakot incident claiming 300 casualties, which were not endorsed by International media. Renowned French scholar Christophe Jaffrelot, in a study on Republic TV debates, pointed out that most Indian organizations have 'substituted entertainment for

journalism'. Indian media channels are engaged in political distraction, promoting specific narratives while diverting attention from the issues, which matter most.²⁸ The most recent Chat Gate scandal in India provided that the BJP government is using local media to provoke anti-Pakistan feelings to divert attention from the issues of governance.²⁹

Conclusion

The conversion of Indian territorial nationalism to religious nationalism is ominously altering the discourse of the Indian state both at domestic and diplomatic levels. The prime feature of Hindu nationalism is to demonize the Indian religious minorities, especially Muslims. Since the 1990s, the mobilization and politicization of electorates in India have revived the contestation and reassertion of religious identities as previously it was the case in the pre-partition era. The resultant religious intolerance and polarization of Indian society provoked by Hindutva ideology as a state discourse are producing violence and anti-Muslim hate campaigns in India.

The vigorous redesigning of Indian nationalism on Hindu lines, evident from its internal discord, is multiplying tensions with Pakistan. The key reason is the emergent Indian hard-line approach characterized by anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan oratory while illustrating Pakistan as a decisive Muslim enemy. The Indian exclusivist nationalism is not limited to its boundaries. BJP government is exclusively engaged in an all-out war against Pakistan. On the other hand, anti-Muslim sentiments are significantly increasing in India while enhancing the insecurity of Indian minorities and animosity of the Indian public towards Pakistan. With the warmongering nature of the political elite and media, the probabilities are high regarding BJP going for any military adventure against Pakistan as a part of its strategy of managing external and internal pressures. The irrationality of Indian foreign policy built on its political aspirations of religious ascendancy of Hinduism is apparent from its several failed attempts in restraining Pakistan.

In the geo-economic era, where states are vigorously involved in free trade initiatives, Indian aggression against Pakistan is diminishing the prospects of cooperative engagement of both states. In the background of BJP assertions of Hindutva and its consequences on Pakistan-India relations, the prejudiced role of Indian media cannot be overlooked. An anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan approach suits BJP as it previously aided them to secure electoral gains while consolidating Hindu nationalism. There is a likelihood that Pakistan will continue to occupy an outsized space in Indian baseless foreign policy and diplomatic rhetoric due to Hindu nationalism and the growing influence of Hindutva extremism.

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- ⁸ The watershed was the 'Shah Bano affair'. The case involved 73 years old Muslim woman, Shah Bano. Since 1932 she had been a spouse of a lawyer from the central Indian province of Madhya Pradesh. After 43 years of marriage, the lawyer married for the second time in 1975 and separated from Shah Bano according to Muslim customary law protected under the Muslim Personal Law. The matter would have come to an end here had Shah Bano accepted her fate as a part of the Muslim customary personal law. Undeterred, she approached the court and, invoking section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, Shah Bano sued her husband for alimony. In 1980, she demanded a review of her allowance, upon which her ex-husband appealed in Supreme Court, arguing that he was not obliged to pay her any alimony as per the Sharia which was protected by Muslim Personal Law. The Supreme Court, however, quashed the appeal and pointed that Section 125 of Criminal procedure applied to people of all religions and faiths living in India.
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- ²⁹ The WhatsApp chats between Indian TV channel Republic's Chief-in-Editor Arnab Goswami and Partho Dasgupta, the former Chief Executive of BARC (Broadcast Audience Research Council) revealed that Goswami knew important decisions of government specifically he was aware of Balakot air strike even three days prior to February 26, 2019, when India claimed to strike inside Pakistan. See: "Opposition seeks probe into Arnab Goswami's chats with former BARC chief." *Hindustan Times*, January 18, 2021. Accessed at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/opposition-seeks-probe-into-arnab-goswami-s-chats-with-former-barc-chief-101610908453079.html>. Also See "Arnab predicted 'MIB secretary will be removed', claimed to know about key government decisions in advance." *Times Now News*, January 17, 2021. Accessed at <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/article/arnab-predicted-mib-secretary-will-be-removed-claimed-to-know-about-key-government-decisions-in-advance/708301>.